

Special Topics: Introduction to the African American Literary Tradition

English 265 – 03

CRN 11097

Fall 2010
Dr. Rychetta Watkins
Extension: 3445
Office Hours: MW 10 – 11:30am; TH 10:45am – noon and by appt

9 am • Palmer 208
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Course Description:

We are defined by stories. Stories contain and communicate the narratives we construct to explain our lived experiences, our natural surroundings and our moral universe. Thus, stories have a profound impact on our values, shaping the decisions we make about our selves and our world and exerting a powerful impact on our reality. The patterns and rhythms of stories are reflected everywhere, in our history, media, politics, economics and laws. Yet, though they appear in many guises, stories are fundamentally a creative exercise borne of the need to persuade, extort and command, or romance, entertain and console.

Since a semester is insufficient to fully introduce you to the entire body of African American literature, our class will focus on readings that illustrate the dialectical relationship between the vernacular and written traditions in African American literature. Beginning with the spirituals and folktales, we will trace the emergence of the written tradition to consider how it plays on, adapts and responds to the vernacular. Along the way, we will also note how the written narrative develops from the colonial and antebellum period, through the New Negro and Black Arts Movements to the present day. As part of our investigation, we will also be mindful of how both vernacular and written texts respond to specific social, cultural and historical contexts through the history of blacks in American. Along the way, we will consider questions like: What is a story? A narrative? What makes a story “black”? How are stories told, retold, communicated and remembered? How does the process of creating narrative reinforce or critique the prevailing values or practices of a society? How do audience, occasion and even law shape narrative? How are our personal stories shaped by the macro stories of states and institutions in our society, and vice versa?

As this is a writing intensive course, we will also discuss the practice and process of planning, composing, drafting and revising papers about literature. We will practice adapting the elements of fiction to the analysis and discussion of texts from the African American literary tradition, as well as using and critiquing sources useful for writing about literature in general and African American literature in particular. By the end of the course, my hope is that you will have developed an appreciation for the African American literary tradition, developed greater facility with the tools of literary analysis and received valuable practice thinking and writing critically about literature.

Required Texts:

Gates, et al.	<i>The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 2nd Edition</i>
Nella Larsen	<i>Passing</i>
Ralph Ellison	<i>Invisible Man</i>
Alice Walker	<i>Meridian</i>
Sapphire	<i>Push</i>
Percival Everett	<i>Erasure</i>

Course goals and objectives

This course fulfills Humanities F4 and F2 requirements. What does that mean? Well, this course is considered part of the broader Foundations liberal arts curriculum that is designed to lend focus and cohesion to your undergraduate experience. The goal of any liberal arts curriculum is to create a well-rounded lifelong learner who has an array of interpretive, analytical and critical thinking skills that will, hopefully, facilitate success through life.

This humanities course focuses on two aspects of that larger curriculum:

F2 “Develop excellence in written communication,” which the college’s catalog defines as “the ability to express concise and methodical arguments in clear and precise prose.”

F4 “Read and interpret literary texts.” As per the catalog description, the “critical and sensitive reading of significant works refines analytical skills and develops an awareness of the power of language.”

Additionally, this course is also considered writing intensive; thus, we will spend a significant amount of time discussing the process of planning, drafting, and revising essays about literature, as well as evaluating and including material gained from sources.

Based on these requirements, I have developed the following course objectives. By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- Understand and think critically about the characteristics of African American literature and the periods or eras of the African American literary tradition.
- Develop an understanding of the basic concepts and principles of African American literary studies.
- Develop critical thinking and analytical skills to assess meaning in texts and tackle problems of interpretation.
- Develop critical thinking and analytical skills to assess argumentative and rhetorical strategies in scholarly texts and engage critical debates about meaning and interpretation.
- Develop ability to assess your own writing and develop a plan for revision.

Why do all of this? The hoped for outcome is that you end up better able to analyze and critically evaluate others’ ideas while also developing a better understanding of and appreciation for this body of literature. At the end of the semester, we will all pause to consider whether these objectives have been met.

Please Bookmark:

Oxford English Dictionary:

www.oed.com

MLA Formatting and Style Guides:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/>
<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/DocMLA.html>

Grade Components

Micro Essays (4 @ 3pp)	40%
Annotated Bibliography (5 pp)	15%
Final Essay (8 pp)	30%
Participation	15%

Guidelines for Our Learning Community

Attendance is very important in a discussion-centered classroom. A successful student will strive to attend every class and be ON TIME. Since situations do arise that may cause you to be absent, you will be allowed up to three absences, or “personal days,” for the semester. After those three instances, only absences for documented illness and documented death or serious illness of

immediate family members will be considered excused. Foreseeable absences for school related travel or activities require documentation and at least one week's advance notice; otherwise, the absence will be counted as unexcused. If your absence IS excused, any in-class assignments you may have missed will not be counted against you. Students who have missed class time should get notes from a classmate, review the notes and consult with me to clear up any questions. **It is your responsibility to get class notes and set up and keep appointments to make up missed work. Missing an appointment or deadline for make-up work will result in failure of the assignment.** More than five **unexcused** absences will result in failure of the course.

Participation is determined by more than attendance. Students are expected to contribute regularly and significantly through in-class discussion and responses that are driven by an attentive reading of the materials assigned for each day. We are striving to build a discourse community based on our shared understandings of the texts we encounter, and our community is incomplete without your thoughtful contributions. Everyone begins the semester with 100 participation and attendance points, which may be reduced for a number of reasons. Examples include, but are not limited to: unexcused absences beyond three (-5 each instance), chronic lateness (-3 each instance after three times), lack of participation (-3), missed conferences (-10), missed class trip or activity (-10), and not logging on to or contributing to Moodle (-2).

Class participation will be graded using the follow rubric:

- *Insightful contributions to class discussions on a daily basis A range (90-100)
- *Thoughtful contributions to class discussions on most days B range (80-89)
- *Occasional contributions to class discussions C range (70-79)
- *Rarely contributes to class discussions or asks questions D range (60-69)
- *Rarely attends class and seldom contributes to discussions F range (0-59)

Note: Excellent attendance is not enough to earn an A. Students who are consistently present but who rarely contribute to discussion may receive a "C" or lower grade according to the scale above.

Communication. Your success is important to me. Please visit my office hours if you have questions or concerns about a reading or assignment. Most emails will be answered within 24 hours of their receipt (except those sent during the weekend), but do not expect an *immediate* response to *any* email, especially those sent between 8pm and 8am. I am happy to respond in conference or in writing to drafts received more than 48 hours before the due date within 24 hours of their receipt. Drafts submitted within 48 hours of the due date **will only receive** feedback in conference if my schedule permits.

Conferences. Throughout the semester, I will hold periodic conferences with portions of you to help you brainstorm for assignments, review feedback, and check your progress. Missing or being unprepared for a scheduled conference appointment will result in an unexcused absence and 10 point deduction from your participation grade.

Writing Assignments

Writing is an integral part of the learning process. Writing helps us engage ideas, retain information, and practice articulating our views on new material. However, writing is itself a process. Thus, the assignments this semester are structured to help us focus in on particular aspects of this process, culminating in a final essay that must demonstrate the skills of analysis, interpretation and critique practiced over the course of the semester. **All written assignments must be submitted via email prior to the class time of the due date.** Extensions must be

arranged at least 1 week PRIOR to the assignment due date. Late assignments will be penalized 1 letter grade per day. All major written assignments must be completed and turned in under penalty of failure of the course. **Each assignment will have its own assignment sheet; these short descriptions are included for reference only.**

Micro Essays. By the end of the semester, students should have amassed a portfolio containing 4 micro essays.

Annotated Bibliography. The annotated bibliography should include bibliographic entries for 8 sources. In approximately 10 sentences, the annotated entry should critically summarize the source and discuss how the source is relevant to your essay. Assignment must conform to the rules of MLA citation style and must be submitted via email prior to class unless otherwise instructed. Assignment should strive to be free of errors of grammar and punctuation. More than 5 errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling may result in the return of the essay for revision and resubmission. All bibliographies must be submitted via email prior to class.

Final Essay Project. In 8 pages, the final essay will bring together the skills of close reading and source analysis in an expository essay that interprets some creative or critical aspect of text in relationship to the scholarly conversation about the work. The assignment will require synthesizing information and incorporating material from at least 6 outside sources. Acceptable sources include articles from peer reviewed journals, chapters from a scholarly monograph or chapters from an edited collection. Wikipedia is not an acceptable, scholarly source. All essays should be submitted via email prior to class. Essays should strive to be free of grammar and punctuation errors. More than 5 errors in grammar, punctuation or spelling may result in the return of the essay for revision and resubmission. **Final Essay Due Saturday, Dec. 11, 2010 @ 6pm**

Keep in Mind. . .

- All assigned reading should be completed before the scheduled class meeting. In order to be prepared for class discussion, you should: read each selection thoughtfully, jotting down any questions that may arise; read each selection actively, making notes where helpful; and reflect on the discussion questions.
- Additionally, this class will include a lot of discussion. At times, we may not see eye to eye on the political, historical, social or textual issues under consideration. We do not have to agree, but we will hold ourselves to the *sine qua non* of academic discourse -- considered, reasoned appeal based on evidence. Thus, we will not use or condone homophobic, racist, sexist or otherwise denigrating language in our discourse community.
- Please refrain from any technodawdling during class. These things detract from the classroom atmosphere, essentially robbing your classmates of the full learning experience and, thereby, violating the Honor Code. Leaving the classroom for repeated cell phone breaks under the guise of bathroom visits is also a no-no and disrupts everyone's classroom experience.
- All written work submitted for evaluation must be unique to the course. No double dipping. If found, all such assignments will receive a failing grade of 0.
- Situations can and do arise that may require adjustments to the schedule of readings, discussion or assignments. Please know that this syllabus is subject to change at my discretion.

Proposed Schedule of Readings

N. B. Always read the headnote for each author

Week 1: Contextualizing African American Literature

- W Aug 25 Welcome; Review syllabus and policies
 F Aug 27 "Talking Books" xxxvii; Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" 2286; Mosley, "Equal Opportunity" 2624

Week 2: The Vernacular Tradition

- M Aug 30 Introduction: "The Vernacular Tradition" 3; "Spirituals" 8; "Gospel" 19; from Sermons and Prayers 94-106 (Listen to the selections marked with ● in your text)
 W Sep 1 "Folktales"; Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" 1041; from *Mules and Men* 1053; from *Dust Tracks on a Road* 1071
 F Sep 3 Ann Petry 1496; Etheridge Knight 1908; Walker, poetry 2427-2429; "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" 2430; "Everyday Use" 2437

Week 3: Of Slavery and Freedom

- M Sep 6 Labor Day Holiday**
 W Sep 8 Library Visit – Meet at Barret Library
Paper 1 Due
 F Sep 10 "The Literature of Slavery and Freedom" 151; Venture Smith 168; Olaudah Equiano 187

Week 4: Of Slavery and Freedom

- M Sep 13 Hammon 162; Wheatley 213; Horton 239
 W Sep 15 Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" 387-452 (from IX)
 F Sep 17 Hayden, "Middle Passage" 1520, "Frederick Douglass" 1528, "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley" 1533; Wideman, "Damballah" 2386; Butler, "Bloodchild" 2515; Johnson 2542

Week 5: Towards the New Negro

- M Sep 20 **In-class workshopping - Paper 2**
 W Sep 22 Cooper, "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Reconstruction and Progress of a Race" 635; Hopkins, "Talma Gordon" 650-662; Dunbar-Nelson 936
 F Sep 24 Introduction: "Literature of Reconstruction" 541; Booker T. Washington 570
Paper 2 Due

Week 6: Towards the New Negro

- M Sep 27 Du Bois, from *The Souls of Black Folk* 692 – 714 (to the end of Chap. IV); Hughes, "I, Too" 1295791-802; Dunbar 905-928 (read only the poetry selections of Johnson and Dunbar)
 W Sep 29 Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art" 777; Locke, "The New Negro" 983; Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past" 962; Schuyler, "The Negro Art Hokum 1220
 F Oct 1 Fisher 1224; Brown 1248; Cullen 1339

Week 7: New Negro Modernism

- M Oct 4 Larsen, *Passing: Part 1* (Please read headnote for Larsen in the *NAAL*, 1085)
 W Oct 6 Larsen, *Passing: Parts 2 & 3*
 F Oct 8 **In-class workshopping - Paper 3**

Week 8: New Negro Modernism

- M Oct 11 Toomer 1168-1213 (to end of section 2)
Paper 3 Due

W Oct 13 "The Blues" 22 (Listen to the selections marked with ● in your text)
F Oct 15 Hughes 1288 – 1311 & 1315-1325

Week 9: African American literature at Mid-Century

M Oct 18 & Tue Oct. 19 **Fall Break**
W Oct 20 *Invisible Man* 1-161; "Jazz" 55 (Listen to the selections marked with ● in your text)
F Oct 22 *Invisible Man* 162 - 295

Week 10: African American literature at Mid-Century

M Oct 25 **In-class workshopping – Paper 4/ Final Paper Proposal**
W Oct 27 *Invisible Man* 296 - 444
F Oct 29 *Invisible Man* 444 - end

Week 11: Literary Responses to Black Power

M Nov 1 "Rhythm and Blues" 69 (Listen to the selections marked with ● in your text);
Introduction: "The Black Arts Era" 1831; Larry Neal 2038; Maulana Karenga 2086;
Addison Gayle 1911
Paper 4 Due – Proposal for Final Paper
W Nov 3 Amiri Baraka, 1937-1946; Ishmael Reed 2051; Harper 2070; Madhubuti 2090
F Nov 5 Mari Evans 1850; Audre Lorde 1919; Sonia Sanchez 1963; Nikki Giovanni 2096;
Bambara from *The Salt Eaters* 2082

Week 12: Literary Responses to Black Power

M Nov 8 Introduction, "Literature since 1975"; Alice Walker, *Meridian* Part 1
(Please read headnote for Walker in the *NAAL*, 2425)
W Nov 10 Alice Walker, *Meridian* Part 2 & 3
F Nov 12 "Hip Hop" 78 (Listen to the selections marked with ● in your text)

Week 13: Contemporary African American Literature

M Nov 15 **In-class workshopping – Incorporating Sources**
W Nov 17 Sapphire, *Push* 1-97
F Nov 19 Sapphire, *Push* 98 - end

Week 14: Contemporary African American Literature

M Nov 22 **Discussion of the film, *Precious***
Annotated Bibliography Due
W & F Nov 24 & 26 **Thanksgiving Break**

Week 15: Contemporary African American Literature

M Nov 29 Percival Everett, *Erasure* 1-131
W Dec 1 Percival Everett, *Erasure* 132-210
F Dec 3 Percival Everett, *Erasure* 211- end
Final Essay Outline Due

Week 16: Contemporary African American Literature

M Dec 6 Discussion of *Bamboozled*
W Dec 8 Course Summary and wrap-up

Conferences on Final Essay – Dec 6, 7, 8 by appt.
Final Essay Due Saturday, Dec. 11, 2010 @ 6pm